HÔTEL DE RAMBOUILLET

LÉON H. VINCENT

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HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN & COMPANY
BOSTON AND NEW YORK

HÔTEL de RAMBOUILLET and THE PRÉCIEUSES

By LEON H. VINCENT



CAMBRIDGE
Printed at The Riverside Press.
Published by Houghton, Mifflin & Company. Boston and New York.
1900.

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To my friend

LINDSAY SWIFT

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HÔTEL
DE
RAMBOUILLET
AND THE
PRÉCIEUSES

IN the Musée de Cluny in Paris are to be seen two blocks of granite. They are 'foundation-stones' of the famous Hôtel de Rambouillet. One bears an inscription to the effect that the mansion of which they were once a part was built by the 'high and

powerful lord' Maître Charles d'Angennes, Marquis de Rambouillet and Pisany. Then follows a list of his other titles and offices. He was Vidame of Mans, Baron of Chaudulor and of Tallemant, a councillor in the king's council of state, and master of his majesty's wardrobe. The date on the stone is June 26, 1618.

At the time of the building of this 'hôtel' the Marquis de Rambouillet was forty-one; the Marquise was eleven years his junior. They had already been married eighteen years. Therefore when Catherine de Vivonne became a bride she was but twelve years of age, a child wife indeed. The wedding took place in 1600. Wedding customs of the year 1600 differed radically, no doubt, from those of the

year 1900. But in one respect weddings are much the same: there are always the customary congratulations, the fervent prophecies of a brilliant marital career, and the private asides of cynical questioning and speculation. No one, so far as we know, had the gift of prophecy to the extent of being able to declare on Catherine de Vivonne's wedding-day that this young girl, with her 'womanly seriousness, her proud spirit, and her rare genius,' was to reorganize society in behalf of virtue and culture, and that without putting pen to paper she was to make her name an inalienable part of the history of French literature.

The story has been told many times and by able men. All students know the books of Rœderer, Walckenaër,

Demogeot, Cousin, and Livet. I should like by the help of these and other books to 'resume' the chief facts of the history of those splendid decades when Hôtel de Rambouillet was in its full glory; when poetry was thought to be worth while; when conversation was an art, and people believed that it made a difference whether one talked well or ill; when the *Astrée* of Honoré d'Urfé was the most fashionable novel in the whole world; when Corneille read his plays before they were played; when Bossuet was a boy orator, and improvised a sermon at midnight before the assembled guests, whereof Voiture was led to remark — and few jests hold their own as this has done for two hundred and sixty-five years — that 'he had never

heard any one preach so early or so late.'

It will be interesting to note how after more than forty years of social supremacy Hôtel de Rambouillet declined and its circle was scattered. New societies arose, not to take its place, but to make each a place for itself. The old order changed. What was simple elegance and virtue at Hôtel de Rambouillet became ostentation and prudery in the new salons. Finally the sect of the Précieuses came into existence, and by their affectations made polite society ashamed of being polite. Then came the satirists, and chief among them Molière, with his sparkling comedy the *Précieuses ridicules*. This play was not an attack upon Hôtel de Rambouillet, as we too

often assume; it was an attack upon the bad imitations of a society so genuine in its character and so noble in its influence that Molière himself must have held it in highest esteem.

I

THE Marquise de Rambouillet was that unusual something, a born social leader. There are not many. Very few so-called social leaders really lead — they *bribe* their followers and do not confess it even to themselves. 'We dare not trust our wit to make our home pleasant to our friend, so we serve ice-creams,' remarked a philosopher. Of many striking facts concerning Hôtel de Rambouillet and its guests this is perhaps the most not-

able, it was a place where people were not afraid to trust their wit. Two and a half centuries have passed, and many critical and historical facts have been brought to light touching civilization in the seventeenth century, but the idea which dominates all other ideas is that Hôtel de Rambouillet stood for the art of conversation. It was a place where men and women met for the interchange of ideas, and the only place where excellence in talk conferred social distinction.

We shall always wonder at the gifts of a woman who could create and hold together such a society. Her success must needs appear almost miraculous to the good people of our day, most of whom would do anything rather than face the terrors of

conversation with nothing to eat. What shrewd woman at this end of the century would risk a potential social success upon anything so frail and intangible as mere talk? The result of such timidity is that good talk is getting rarer every day.

Historians credit the Marquise de Rambouillet with having founded the first salon known in France. It is unlikely, however, that when she established herself in her new home Catherine de Vivonne saw the end from the beginning. And it is even more unlikely that she had a definite conception of what had never before existed. Such an assemblage as gathered about her was a growth. She had the gift of social organization. This gift includes many elements, but

among them obviously the power to attract and the power to hold.

She was an attractive woman. She was well-born, talented, beautiful, and rich. And she was a good woman. This is usually considered plain praise. It suggests homely qualities and dull domesticities. Nevertheless it must stand. This great 'society leader' was austerely virtuous. Moreover her downright unaffected goodness influenced everybody about her. Without perhaps intending it, she did a most extraordinary thing. In a corrupt age she made virtue fashionable. To praise her for this is not to praise superficially; we must remember how many people are unwilling to accept virtue on less advantageous terms. It is something to have got such people

to realize that it may be good form to keep the Ten Commandments.

The Marquise de Rambouillet was the daughter of Jean de Vivonne, Marquis de Pisani, who had been French ambassador at the court of Rome. There was Italian blood in her veins. Her maternal grandmother was Clarice Strozzi, a kinswoman of Catharine de Médicis. The Marquise was therefore related to Marie de Médicis, wife of Henry IV. She had become the mother of seven children before she was twenty-six. Of her five daughters the most famous was Julie-Lucine, afterwards Duchesse de Montausier. One of the sons died at the age of seven. The other, who inherited his grandfather's title of Marquis de Pisani, has been described

as clever, and a sworn enemy of professional beaux esprits.

In the first years of her wedded life Catherine de Vivonne took such place at court as the high rank of her own and her husband's family entitled her to. Her physical and moral daintiness revolted from the rude manners and licentious intrigue which characterized court life under Henry IV. Little by little she began to withdraw. As an excuse for this she could plead the responsibilities of a rapidly increasing family. The fact that she no longer went into the great world did not result in making her socially isolated. So much of the great world as was really worth knowing began to come to her. Hôtel de Rambouillet enjoyed from the first such distinction

as will be necessarily conferred upon a house when its mistress has youth, beauty, wealth, and rank. It seems also to have been a home in our modern sense of the word. The sum total of domestic happiness was great. This alone would serve to differentiate its manners from those of the dissolute court. Virtue was hereditary in the houses of d'Angennes and Vivonne. 'Life at court and life at Hôtel de Rambouillet were antipathetic,' says Rœderer. And he also says that people who frequented both places seemed to change their character when they passed from the one to the other.

The irreproachable purity of the Marquise de Rambouillet's life has been a most grateful theme to critics

and historians. They reflect with satisfaction that the distinguished artists in tattle and scandal who flourished in the seventeenth century have spared her good name. In all the records of that interesting past there is not one anecdote, or rumor, or hint, which can be construed to her discredit. At the present time all this would be taken for granted; but in 1630, if one said that a woman was beautiful, it was regarded as a striking and unusual corollary if one were able to add that she was good.

It has moreover been accounted among the conspicuous merits of this great lady that she never wrote a book or kept a journal. She was an excellent talker without being either epigrammatic or witty. She spoke per-

fectly Italian, French, and Spanish, and studied Latin in order to be able to read Vergil in the original. Her vivacity was not the sort for the possession of which Matthew Arnold so often apologized. The Marquise was 'good to everybody.' Her amusements were those of the women of her time; and on the whole neither more nor less frivolous than the amusements of to-day. She loved beautiful things, said Tallemant de Réaux, who himself loved many things that were not beautiful.

Hôtel de Rambouillet stood in Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre. At the present time the site is occupied by the Grand Magazin du Louvre. One buys dry-goods and millinery where once were welcomed such guests as

Malherbe, Corneille, Chapelain, Voiture, La Rochefoucauld, and Madame de Sévigné. This is a desolation *worse* than that of Balclutha.

The original mansion was the property of Catherine de Vivonne's father, and was known as Hôtel de Pisani. In 1600 it received the name by which it afterward became famous. Many changes were made in its construction from time to time. Once indeed it was almost leveled to the ground, so radical were the projected improvements. The Marquise was her own architect, and dared to change the position of the staircase, which up to her time had held undisputed sway over the best part of a house. She banished it to a corner and built it in an easily ascending curve, — a thing

no one seems to have thought of doing before, at least in mansions of that sort. The Marquise had that wisdom which is denied to professional architects and given only to women who know what they want.

She also introduced the custom of having instead of one vast drawing-room, as dreary as it was magnificent, a series of rooms upon the same floor. The guest made his way to the presence of the great lady herself by a succession of ante-chambers, chambers, and cabinets. She seems to have been the first to realize that a room could be decorated in any other color than tan or red. Her particular salon was tapestried in blue velvet. This was an innovation, and people commented upon it. The 'blue room' was some-

thing to see. It soon became the focus of that type of refinement and lettered elegance which the Marquise and her friends represented, a refinement to be rigidly distinguished from the labored and quintessential preciosity of forty years afterward.

From the first this house was democratic. It was impossible that blood should not count for something with a woman 'who was both Strozzi and Savelli,' nevertheless other gifts besides those of long descent were welcomed at Hôtel de Rambouillet. One saw a great variety of people, noblemen, ladies of high degree, priests, soldiers, courtiers, poets, and novelists, and the occasional adventurer without whom society could not exist. A high premium was placed

on wit and learning, though it was hoped that wit and learning would be accompanied by good manners. Men of letters found that here the atmosphere had a caressing quality which they had never before experienced. They were soothed and comforted thereby. Moreover their reception was so genuinely cordial that it fortified their self-respect. When we see the haughty magnificence of bearing with which some of our modern young novelists and poets conduct themselves, even to the extent of offering us two fingers to shake, it is difficult to realize that there could have been a time when literary powers did not imply a large measure of social distinction. But so it was. Even Voltaire complained that in his day pro-

fessional authors were snubbed. Such a complaint would have been better justified in the first third of the seventeenth century. The Marquise de Rambouillet did more perhaps than any other one woman to secure for authors the privilege of being received into the 'best society' on equal terms with the aristocracy. This, to be sure, is not the chief end of literature, but it may be accounted one of the rights of authors considered merely as human beings. The Marquise helped them to establish this right.

It is a question whether there was to be found in France a hostess so tolerant as was she with respect to the humors and caprices of literary men. She may even have accentuated their peculiarities. We have heard of

spoiled children, and some of us, no doubt, have had the pleasure of being such. The world is full of spoiled children. The world is also full of spoiled authors, and the Marquise de Rambouillet was the woman who did a great deal to spoil them. This was partly from kindness of heart, and partly from a genuine respect for letters. Up to her time poets and authors generally held an equivocal position in society. That complete and godlike independence which men like Victor Hugo and Alfred Tennyson enjoyed was not possible in the first half of the seventeenth century. Most of the poets were attached to one or other of the great houses. They were 'domestics,' though not in the restricted sense in which we now

use that word. A man might have a poet in his house as he might have any highly decorative piece of furniture. He would respect both the furniture and the poet for their intrinsic worth, but his pride would be rooted in the fact that he was the proprietor of both. Rœderer gives a list of sixteen poets, all of whom were attached to some royal or noble house. The list includes Clement Marot, Ronsard, Malherbe, Racan, Théophile, Voiture, Sarrazin, and Benserade. Their respective positions were honorable, no doubt, 'but they were dependent.' At Hôtel de Rambouillet the poets found themselves released from all personal obligations. The poet was no longer a part of the household equipment of a rich and

powerful lord; he was a man among men. He was able to show his preferences, and to decide by just what nobleman he would consent to be patronized. Better than this he was at liberty to say whether he would consent to be patronized at all, or would elect to live independently. Many poets preferred patronage; it was comfortable and they were used to it. None the less it is a great thing when men acquire the privilege of being men. For this if for no other reason the various Societies of Authors should build a monument to the Marquise de Rambouillet.

To mention all the guests distinguished for birth, genius, and learning who at one time or another were welcomed at Hôtel de Rambouillet

would be to compile a society 'blue-book' and a dictionary of men of letters. The names are suggestive to the student, though uninteresting to the general reader.

Hôtel de Rambouillet was rebuilt in 1618. Reunions had been held, however, at an earlier date. For example, Armand Duplessis, afterward Cardinal Duc de Richelieu, was presented to Madame de Rambouillet's circle in 1615. He was then but twenty years of age. Cospeau was his social sponsor.

There are three well-defined periods in the life of this salon. The first is the period of formation; it includes the years between 1620 and 1630. In 1620 the Marquise was thirty-two years old and approaching the 'perfect

age' of thirty-five. I speak of this because I have heard a contemporary say that thirty-five is an age which 'needs to be celebrated as the most charming which a matron reaches and remains at. When a man has the privilege of talking with a woman of thirty-five he may well abandon the society of your raw, incoherent Juliets to the pink-and-white Romeos who like it.'

Conspicuous among the guests of the first period were the Duc de Guise, the Duc de la Trémouille, Maréchal de Souvré, the Marquis de Vigean, Arnauld d'Andilly, and Chaudebonne, who had the honor of starting Voiture upon his career. Notable among the men of letters were the old poet Malherbe, his disciple the Marquis de Racan, and Vaugelas, who was even

then making those minute studies of current speech which twenty-seven years later were to be given to the world in his famous *Remarks on the French Language*. Here, too, were to be seen Gombauld, Balzac, Chapelain, and Voiture. These last four were young men, all under thirty when this period begins, while Voiture was only twenty-two. Among elect and beautiful women were Charlotte de Montmorency, Princesse de Condé, the Duchesse de la Trémouille, and the young Marquise de Sablé. Julie d'Angennes, the loved daughter of the house, was about eighteen, her friend Madelaine de Scudéry of the same age. Youth, with all that youth implies, was very apparent at Hôtel de Rambouillet during this period.

The second period, the period of greatest splendor, begins in 1630 and closes about 1638. 'The blue room became a veritable sanctuary of taste, a school where the seventeenth century obtained its education.' Among the new recruits were the Duc d'Enghien, the Duc de Montausier, Saint-Evremond, La Rochefoucauld, Patru the great forensic orator, and Ménage the scholar, celebrated then for his learning, and now because he was the instructor of Madame de Sévigné. Other names, suggestive of various gifts and ambitions, are Mairet, Rotrou, Conrart, Sarrazin, Godeau, Costar, Benserade, Georges de Scudéry, and Scarron. Bossuet's first appearance in this circle was in 1643. The Abbé Cotin began to come about this time,

unconscious that his claim to immortality would need to be based on the facts that he was satirized by Boileau and caricatured by Molière. In marked contrast with him one might mention Pierre Corneille, to whose interest Hôtel de Rambouillet was sufficiently devoted, for it took his part against the terrible Richelieu in that sensational quarrel of the *Cid*.

There were many brilliant women both from the aristocracy and the middle class. Mademoiselle de Bourbon-Condé, afterwards Duchesse de Longueville; also Mademoiselle de Coligny, the future Comtesse de la Suze, she who became a Catholic because her husband was a Protestant, and who (in the language of Queen Christina) separated from him in order

not to see him either in this world or the next. One should also mention Anne de Rohan, Princesse de Guéméné, and the Comtesse de Maure. Perhaps the most striking figure was Angélique Paulet. They called her 'the beautiful lioness' because of her magnificent mane of golden hair and the haughtiness of her bearing. To her was first applied a phrase which afterward became famous; it was said that she had 'cheveux d'un blond hardi.' Shall we translate it 'hair of a courageous blonde'? It was an ingenious expression intended to mitigate the brutality of saying that a woman's hair was tinged with red. Mademoiselle Paulet had other gifts besides those of beauty and fine manners. She sang and played the lute.

As a tribute to the charm of her voice they invented the legend that two nightingales had been found dead (of envy, no doubt) at the edge of a fountain where Angélique Paulet had sung. Clearly when the gentlemen of that day set out to pay a compliment they succeeded.

The third period in the life of Hôtel de Rambouillet, the period of decline, includes the years between 1648 and 1665. At the beginning of this period occurred the quarrel between the Uranistes and the Jobelins. The point of issue was which of two sonnets was the better, Voiture's sonnet on *Uranie* or Benserade's sonnet on *Job*. The discussion was more than animated. I liken it to one of those newspaper contentions, humorous or

acrid, with which we are familiar. The occasion may be slight, but the interest and comment are disproportionate, as in the case of the *Lady and the Tiger*.

Many causes united to bring about the decline of Hôtel de Rambouillet. The marriage of Julie and the death of Voiture made radical changes. The war of the Fronde threw society for the time being into a condition of absolute unrest and disorder. The rise of new circles where pedantry and literary affectation had full swing was not without its effect. Yet amid these conditions Hôtel de Rambouillet was sound at heart; and the names it honored are still honorable, such as Madame de La Fayette and Madame de Sévigné.

Historians have often lamented their inability to give an accurate picture of life in the 'blue room.' We shall never know what it was like. An ancient building can be restored; it is not so easy to restore 'an obliterated state of society.' There were times when the talk was almost transcendental in its perfection. Men used to speak of it in after years with something like awe. Wisdom prevailed and affectation stayed in the background. Chapelain was able to say in 1638: 'They do not talk learnedly but they *do* talk reasonably, and there is no place in the world where there is more good sense and less pedantry.'

They used to have parlor lectures or readings. They discussed new works. Sometimes they passed a

judgment which posterity has not confirmed; but that is no more than critics do nowadays. They constituted themselves a literary tribunal. Authors, whatever they may have pretended to the contrary, stood in honest fear of this tribunal. Hôtel de Rambouillet claimed the right to modify and restrict the growth of the French language. There was a fitness in this. These people were of the best blood, the best breeding, and the best literary culture in France. They might have contended that their use of words offered a standard to which the general public would do well to conform. They gave so much time to the question of correct speech that they were ridiculed for it. They could afford the ridicule. In one par-

ticular their judgment was to be preferred to that of the mockers without the gate. They had the breadth of view to apprehend the great truth that fine breeding is not limited to manners and dress. He is not truly well-bred whose speech lacks breeding. What if they did discuss the question whether one should say *muscardin* or *muscadin*, *sarge* or *serge*, *Roume* or *Rome?* These were not the only or the most vital topics of conversation. Rœderer answered all that sort of criticism upon the conversation of the 'blue room' when he said: 'It is better to talk about words than about people;' and he made an infinitely suggestive remark when he added: '*The passion for good language ought to be a national passion.*'

In its attitude on the great question of language, Hôtel de Rambouillet offers a marked contrast to society of to-day. The influence of the modern fashionable world is more apparent in manners and dress than in language and literature. Society is well groomed, but its garments are uniformly more attractive than its parts of speech. Why should a woman get her hats from Virot and her adjectives from *Chimmie Fadden?* Not all women do, to be sure. Why should any woman, any man, lack in fastidiousness about the choice of words? Society ought to be as impeccable in its language as it is in its attire.

II

LET us consider three men of letters whose influence was potent at Hôtel de Rambouillet. They are d'Urfé, Malherbe, and Balzac. Only one of the three can be accounted an actual member of the circle, for Balzac was seldom there, and d'Urfé never.

Honoré d'Urfé was the author of a gigantic romance entitled the *Astrée*. It was a continued story written in days when 'continued' meant *long* con-

tinued. We sometimes complain of the novel which runs a year in a monthly magazine. Let us think on our mercies. The admirers of the *Astrée* were expected to read and to wait with a patience unknown to our hurried generation. The first two parts of the romance, comprising more than two thousand pages, were published in 1610. Then the public waited nine years for the third part, and eight years more for another installment. D'Urfé died in 1625, and the fourth part was published by his private secretary, Balthazar Baro, who also added a fifth part, his own work, bringing the story to a conclusion. Therefore between the beginning of the beginning and the end of the end was an interval of not less than sev-

enteen years. Indeed the historians assign for the meditation and writing of this extraordinary book a quarter of a century.

The *Astrée* is a pastoral romance more or less autobiographical. The hero is a youth by the name of Céladon. His manner of loving made him in the eyes of readers of that day the ideal of constancy. The type has gone out of fashion. A modern French critic hints that one would more easily resign himself to being called a Don Juan than a Céladon. For the constancy which is admirable degenerates in Céladon's case into a humble and dog-like fidelity exasperating to the reader. Men have been the slaves of love before and since d'Urfé's time; but they

have usually shown a healthy and commendable impatience. This victim of beauty's caprice rejoices in his own tortures and 'adores the hand which strikes him.' In his melancholy, his inactivity, his passionate endurance, Céladon is the prototype of Werther, René, and those other handsome young pessimists of fiction who suffer so eloquently, but who carefully refrain from doing anything lest they mar the edge of their grief.

The *Astrée* had an enormous success. It became the 'code of polite society.' The critics find traces of its influence in the tragedies of Racine, the comedies of Marivaux, the romances of Prévost, in the writings of J. J. Rousseau, and even in certain stories of

George Sand.[1] Morillot declares that nothing is equal to the *Astrée* for presenting a complete and accurate picture of the contemporaries of Balzac and Voiture. It is therefore one of the 'sources' of the history of polite society. These shepherds and shepherdesses who tend their flocks so gracefully and pay such ingenious compliments to one another bear no relation to Gabriel Oak. On the contrary they are people of high birth wearing the pastoral disguise for their own pleasure, and as a symbol of that peace and rest for which the world was beginning to yearn. It is a book with a key, and readers were pleased to think

[1] Brunetière: *Manuel*, p. 105. Jusserand: *Le Roman anglais*, p. 17.

that in spite of the masks and the costumes they recognized eminent men and women of that day.

The *Astrée* was happy in the class of readers it attracted. The book which could win the undisguised and sometimes unqualified admiration of Saint Francis de Sales, Camus, Patru, Huet, La Fontaine, Boileau, and Madame de Sévigné must have had notable virtues.

Malherbe was held in high esteem at Hôtel de Rambouillet. Like many men who are self-willed, rough of speech, and imperious of manner, he could be courtly and gracious. These robust geniuses are easily controlled by a woman who commands their respect and admiration. Malherbe was civilized in the presence of the

Marquise, and his poetry was at all times civilized.

Malherbe's verse was that of a man who thought much but was seldom inspired. 'He was a poet of the second order,' says Pergameni, 'a poet by reflection rather than by instinct,' one of that class in whom reason takes the place of heart. His writing lacked blood, perhaps; the man himself was altogether human, positive, egoistic, tyrannical.

He reminds us a little of Dr. Johnson. He had Johnson's pungent wit, overbearing manner, frankness of speech, and reverence for authority. He was like Johnson in the want of external correspondence between the poetical product and man who produced. Like him, too, in the way in

which he would browbeat and intimidate his circle of worshipers and pupils. That anecdote has the true Johnsonian flavor which describes Malherbe repeating some verses to Racan and then asking how he liked them. Racan excused himself from giving an opinion: 'I could not understand them, you ate half of the words.' Malherbe, irritated, exclaimed: 'Mortdieu! if you make me angry I'll eat them all. They are mine; since I made them I am able to do what I please with them.'

That satirical observer Tallemant de Réaux says that Malherbe was the worst reciter in the world, and spoiled his beautiful verses in repeating them. It was hardly possible to understand him on account of the impediment

in his speech and the thickness of his voice. 'Besides this he spat at least six times in reciting one stanza of four lines. This is why the Cavalier Marini said that he had never seen a man so wet nor a poet so dry.'

Tallemant gives a handful of such anecdotes which help us to conceive the brusque old poet as vividly as if he had been provided with a Boswell. It was a part of Malherbe's mission to castigate bad versifiers, or at least versifiers whom he considered bad. He went to dine with Desportes, who received him graciously and offered to give him a version of the Psalms which he had just printed. 'Do not trouble,' said Malherbe, 'I have seen them; your soup is worth more than

your Psalms.' The dinner is said to have been eaten in silence.

He expressed his opinion of human nature in his characteristic comment on the death of Abel. 'Was n't that a fine début! There were only three or four human beings in the world, and they began to kill one another; after that, what was God able to hope from mankind that He should take the trouble to preserve them?'

Malherbe's services to French literature were on the side of restraint, finish, nobility of form, perfection in handling the materials of poetry. He was late in beginning, and he worked with such deliberation that he left but a slender volume of verse. His influence was wide-reaching in his own day, and in this happy age of crum-

bling idols he is secure in his reputation as a seventeenth century classic. Even the gibes of an Arsène Houssaye cannot affect him much. As an illustration of his willingness to let a poem bide its time and slowly grow into perfection they cite his verses addressed to the first president of Verdun. Malherbe wished to console this gentleman for the death of his wife. 'By the time the stanzas were finished the gentleman had been consoled, remarried, and was himself *dead*.'

In his ill-kept and badly furnished apartments Malherbe presided over a literary circle composed of younger poets who recognized him as the master. The best known of these pupils was Racan, author of the *Bergeries*, a more absent-minded gentle-

man than Parson Adams, if the stories told of him be not exaggerations.

He was 'caught young' by Malherbe, who ruled him as an old-time pedagogue might have done, even forbidding his pupil to marry, and criticising his verse with caustic severity. Malherbe kept Racan humble by telling him that a poet was of no more use to his country than a skittles-player, and that if their own verses lived after them they would be praised as men who had been rather clever in arranging words in a certain order, but who were on the whole fools to spend their time that way.

Balzac is usually disposed of by calling him the Malherbe of prose, — a facile kind of criticism made familiar to us in those attempts to explain

George Meredith by speaking of him as a prose Browning. He was a rhetorician, this Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, who employed the epistolary form as best suited to his literary needs. James Howell read Balzac's letters, and finding them little to his taste, said so in terms which it will be proper not to repeat. We need to read but one of Balzac's grandiose epistles and follow it with a 'familiar letter' of James Howell to understand how antipathetic the Englishman and the Frenchman were, and that for reasons with which racial antagonism had nothing to do. The letters of Balzac are the opposite of familiar. They contain none of the element which gives charm to what in this day are called letters. With us a letter is

something natural, chatty, unostentatious. The sentences are short, the language colloquial. One speaks of the sorrow of breaking in a new cook or a new pair of shoes. Domestic adventures are not tabooed, nor does the writer disdain to give the thrilling history of the last church social. In short, when we speak of a letter we mean the most informal type of literary composition, a thing written with such careless good nature that we are confused at the thought of having it seen by any other eye than that for which it was originally intended.

When, however, Balzac wrote letters he wished them to be seen of men. The letters might be addressed to a great lord or a powerful churchman, but they were meant to be read by

who could appreciate them, and most of all by posterity. For a time Balzac's vogue was extraordinary. He was spoken of not merely as the most eloquent man in France, such praise was too reserved and judicial: he was the only eloquent man in France. When he was but twenty-four years of age Perron said of him to Coeffeteau: 'If he goes on as he has begun, he will be the master of masters.' They were speaking of his literary style.

It is well to be suspicious of a seventeenth century Frenchman when he comes bearing compliments. Two men of letters might be depended upon to exchange verbal caresses whatever they privately thought one of the other. Nevertheless there

must have been a measure of sincerity among them. This extract from one of Voiture's letters shows how it was customary to address Balzac. The illustration is all the better for coming from Voiture, who used to spice his compliments with minute touches of malice and irony. 'To-day all men listen to you. No one who understands how to read is indifferent. They who are jealous for the honor of this kingdom take no more pains to learn what Monsieur the Marshal de Créquy is doing than to learn what you are doing. And we have more than two generals in the army who do not make so great a sensation with thirty thousand men as do you in your solitude.'

Voiture reached the superlative of

panegyric with perfect ease, like the accomplished man of the world that he was. There was nothing to say more emphatic than this: Balzac was more in the public eye than two generals each with thirty thousand men.

In the pretty little edition of *Les Œuvres diverses du Sieur de Balzac* published at Leyden by Jean Elzevier in 1658 will be found four 'discourses,' inscribed to the Marquise de Rambouillet. They comprise about sixty pages, and are in part the outcome of conversations which may have taken place in the 'blue room.' One is on the *Roman Character*, another is the continuation of a talk on *Conversation among the Romans*, the third is on *Mecenas*, the fourth on *Glory*. Upon the testimony of these letters

Rœderer bases his argument for the high intellectual tone of Hôtel de Rambouillet. The Marquise was genuinely interested in these themes. The woman who could call out such discourses from the 'grand epistolier de France' was neither a pedant nor a précieuse. For the discourses do not contain enough of the pedantic to satisfy a blue-stocking, nor enough of affectation to amuse a précieuse. And it would be attributing an excess of vanity to Balzac to suppose that in writing to the Marquise he had no disinterested motive,—that he thought chiefly of the admiring comment which would be called out by the reading of his highly finished essays in that part of the great world whose praise was best worth having.



III

WE are warned not to think of this great house as a sort of Academy, a mere club of pedants and blue-stockings. It was not that. It was emphatically the gay world, life, society. Everything was there which the world enjoys, with perhaps a touch of ceremonial reserve hitherto unknown. There might be grave arguments over the use of prepositions, or the propriety of admitting a new word to the French language, but there was

also music and dancing. In a house filled with young people, pleasure will be the order of many days. The party for pleasure at Hôtel de Rambouillet was organized and headed by Vincent Voiture.

Voiture was what the French call, with untranslatable felicity, un bel esprit; in England they would say a wit. His career shows how democratic Hôtel de Rambouillet was, and how entirely amiable qualities atoned for the lack of a grandfather. Voiture was of humble birth, the son of a wine-merchant of Amiens, but his gifts carried him to a foremost place in the most cultivated society of his day. Men of highest rank treated him as an equal. He had abundance of animal spirits, and he also had tact,

suppleness of intellect, humor, a knowledge of men and women. People admired his cleverness and marveled at his audacity. The Duc d'Enghien once said: 'If Voiture were of our rank he would be unendurable.' When he grew old Voiture became peevish, and was tolerated just as if he had been a lord or a rich uncle.

Cousin praises Voiture because he was 'the first example of a man of letters who lived among the great and still maintained his independence.' The praise would be justly bestowed if it were true that Voiture took the attitude of a professed man of letters. He did not. He trifled at literature. But he trifled with exceeding care, and his works live after him. He wrote letters and poems. He printed no-

thing during his lifetime. When, after his death, these writings were collected and published in two volumes, people laughed at the title which the literary executor gave to them — the *Works of Vincent Voiture.* But every historian of French literature takes them into account. Cousin gives Voiture the credit of being inventor of what we would now call vers de société. This poet would live if only by virtue of his connection with Hôtel de Rambouillet. Honors are still done him. Andrew Lang translates him, and German Gelehrte write theses on his syntax.

In the *Grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses* Voiture figures under the name of Valéré, that is, Valerius. His influence among the little salons was so

great that if he showed himself once at a lady's house her reputation as a précieuse was made.

At Hôtel de Rambouillet he exerted to the utmost his extraordinary powers of entertainment. He excelled in that which we vaguely and helplessly describe as the art of keeping things going. A house which was at no time a solemn place was farther than ever from solemnity when he was present. Moreover we are in France, and France is gay, and the French are a gay people. We are to take for granted all those things in which youth delights, the fêtes, the fancy-dress balls, the collations, the picnics. They loved to travesty mythological scenes in the ample Parc Rambouillet; this was their way of

presenting Gibson tableaux. Half the charm of their comedies and fêtes grew out of the improvised character of these things. That genius of the Latin race for doing the right thing at exactly the right time came into play. What our cold Anglo-Saxon temperament would spoil was infinitely light and graceful under their touch.

Voiture also had a taste for the kind of joke called practical. For this he has been reproved. Bourciez calls him the enfant terrible of Hôtel de Rambouillet. One illustration of his mischievous wit is given in all the books. He encountered on the street a wandering animal-trainer with two dancing bears. He brought all three up stair and through corridor into the room where, on the other side of a

large screen, the Marquise and a group of her friends were sitting. One can guess the consternation of this lady when, on hearing a scuffling behind her, she looked around and saw four hairy paws resting on the top of the screen with muzzles laid between them and bearish eyes blinking down upon her.

Was it in punishment for this jest that the Marquise persuaded Voiture that he was almost losing his mind, or at least becoming an unconscious plagiarist? He used, after the approved custom of the day, to hand his verses about in manuscript. The Marquise had one of his newest poems printed and the leaf bound into a volume. Then she called his attention to the extraordinary resem-

blance between the two poems. For the moment Voiture was staggered, and fully believed that at the time he was, as he supposed, writing original verse, he must have been remembering something he had read.

Another personage at Hôtel de Rambouillet was the Duc de Montausier. He played as prominent a rôle as Voiture, but was so utterly unlike the little poet that the two men form a piquant contrast.

Montausier made his first appearance at Hôtel de Rambouillet in 1631. He was then Marquis de Salle, and barely twenty-two years of age. He became enamored of Julie, and later an aspirant for her hand. If it were ever true that a young lady accepted a suitor because all the world spoke

well of him, Montausier would have made easy conquest, for he was a man whom no one named unless to praise. This is a little surprising since his virtues were of a rugged and militant sort. The tradition is significant which says that Molière drew from Montausier some of the finest traits in the character of the Misanthrope.

Most men who pay court to women expect their reward within a reasonable time. This particular courtship was protracted to thirteen years. It is accounted a phenomenal case in the annals of love-making. We are not, however, to suppose that Montausier spent thirteen years at the lady's feet, breathing amorous sighs, and writing sonnets to her beauty. Some gallants made love in

this feeble fashion, imitating Céladon in the *Astrée*. Montausier was of more heroic build. He was a soldier. His courting was 'punctuated' with battles, wounds, and imprisonments. But he returned from the wars with but one thought — to win the hand of Julie d'Angennes. The situation became intense. Everybody wondered how it was going to turn out. The lover was worthy of his mistress, but she wished not to marry. 'He laid siege to the fortress of her affections strictly in accordance with the rules.' All the world, as the French say, became absorbed in this interesting drama. The most intimate friends of the Marquise took it upon themselves to speak in Montausier's behalf. Even the great Richelieu brought his in-

fluence to bear. The courtship was so long drawn out that there was time for the aspect of French politics to change, and a new minister to come into power; Mazarin was no less sympathetic than his illustrious predecessor. Even the Queen spoke for Montausier. The young man himself took one step which meant a good deal in those days; he changed his religion. The house of d'Angennes was Catholic; Montausier was a Calvinist. He embraced the old faith, and observed that it made little difference by which route one went to Heaven.

Montausier, as I have said, was twenty-two years old when he first saw Julie d'Angennes. He was thirty-five when the marriage took place.

This was in 1645. The bride was three years older than her husband.

In 1641 Montausier complimented the lady of his affections with that graceful gift known as the *Guirlande de Julie*. It was a beautiful folio volume, the leaves of vellum, the binding of red morocco doublée by Le Gascon, and bearing the monogram J-L, for Julie-Lucine, both on the outside and inside of the cover. The frontispiece was a 'zephyr' holding in one hand a rose and in the other a garland of twenty-nine flowers. On the succeeding leaves of the volume each flower was painted separately by Robert, and beneath were madrigals inscribed in the hand of the famous calligraphist, Nicholas Jarry. The madrigals were sixty-two in number.

Nineteen poets contributed, among them Chapelain, Gombauld, Scudéry, Racan, and Conrart. Sixteen of the threescore poems are by Montausier himself. Voiture alone of those whom we should expect to find represented was not of the number. Did the enfant terrible of Hôtel de Rambouillet actually 'pout' and refuse to play, as Bourciez hints? In 1855 Cousin was able to thank God in a manner truly French that the *Guirlande de Julie* was still in existence, a carefully guarded treasure in one of the noble houses of France. It has been upon the market at least once, and then brought the considerable sum of three thousand dollars. That was a hundred years ago. One hardly dares to think to what towering height the

virtuosi and bibliophiles of to-day might run the price if the Garland were to be brought to the block.

Historians date the decline of Hôtel de Rambouillet from Julie's marriage. She represented the younger life of the stately house. If the Marquise herself could not be called old in 1645, she was at least of middle age; she had passed her fifty-seventh birthday. For thirty-five years she had presided over a circle whose name is to this day the synonym for refinement and culture. During that time other women had learned, partly from her, the art of conducting a salon. Many of these women were gifted and of high social standing. They were able to preside with grace and intelligence. Many of them were of

little culture and possessed only of the imitative faculty. The best they could do was to travesty what they had seen or heard in the 'blue room,' or still worse to travesty what they had not known by experience but only heard about. Between 1645 and 1648 a new word 'précieuse' began to pass from lip to lip. Without attempting to give an accurate definition to it the public adopted it. They to whom the word was applied accepted it with complacency; they who applied it to others did so with an accent which might mean anything from admiration to contempt.

IV

WHO were the Précieuses? We are usually taught to believe that all the habitual frequenters of the 'blue room' are to be so accounted. But Rœderer, the first historian to have definite ideas on the subject, and the historian who has succeeded in imposing his ideas on all other writers, says not so. As I understand him, Preciosity may have cradled in the 'blue room,' and the Marquise de Rambouillet will always be reputed

its mother; but she is not to be held responsible for the later vagaries of her offspring.

Take the so-called English æsthetic movement of a few years since. Ruskin was in a way responsible for the whole affair, sun-flowers, knee-breeches, clinging garments, the opera of *Patience*, all of it. That is to say, he was as much responsible for it as the Marquise de Rambouillet was responsible for the antics of the précieuses. Hôtel de Rambouillet had its affectations, but the extravagances which called out the satire of Molière were devised by the précieuses for their own peculiar enjoyment. Even at the time when Marini, the Neapolitan poet, was her honored guest, he who is thought to represent verbal

affectation carried to its extreme, the Marquise remained faithful to Malherbe. The poet of law and order was *her* poet.

Every good and useful thing has its parody. There is not a patent medicine of reputed worth which does not bear upon its label the warning, 'Beware of imitations.'

The salons which came into existence just before and during the decline of Hôtel de Rambouillet were modeled more or less imperfectly upon it. No woman had the social gifts of the Marquise, no woman could hope to bring together such a number of shining lights. They did what they could. Some did well and some did very ill. In almost every case there was lack of a wholesome re-

straining force. It was hardly possible to play the fool before the stately Marquise and her daughters, before real wits and real poets; but there was no end to the airs these women put on when they set up, each for herself, a petty literary court.

Four or five of these salons deserve only courteous mention. Such were Hôtel d'Albret and Hôtel de Richelieu, which continued the aristocratic traditions of the 'blue room.' Hôtel d'Albret was a princely mansion where one met the best of society, attracted there by the hospitality of the marshal, his high position, and his genuine love of conversation and letters. Monsieur and Madame de Richelieu had about the same guests that one found at Hôtel d'Albret; for example,

Madame de Scarron was often to be seen at these houses. They were spoken of as copies, and in a way continuations, of Hôtel de Rambouillet. But they lacked a Voiture, by whose vivacity and wit their reputation might be carried down to posterity.[1]

Other circles of distinction were those of Mademoiselle de Montpensier, the daughter of Gaston, Duc d'Orleans, the lady general of the Fronde, now living in splendid 'disgrace' at the Luxembourg; of Madame de Longueville, Madame de Sablé, and Madame de La Fayette. The world is indebted to two of these women

[1] Rœderer: *Mémoire sur la Société polie*, chap. xiii.

for their share in the *Maxims* of La Rochefoucauld. The Marquise de Sablé wrote maxims. So did the members of her circle. At this house, whose attractions were sufficient to bring Arnauld and Pascal, the conversation turned on high and serious themes, metaphysics, theology, physical science, grammar. How vital the question of correct speech was held to be we know from a little book on the art of translation written by the gentleman who called himself Sieur de Lestang, and dedicated to Madame de Sablé. 'I know,' he says, 'that the masters of our language consult you in their doubts, make you the arbitress of their differences, and submit to your decisions. In truth you are the person who best knows all the

laws and rules of discourse, who best knows how to utter sentiments and ideas with grace and clarity, who best knows how to employ those happy forms of expression at once ingenious, charming, and characteristically French. In short, you are the one who best knows all those mysteries and delicacies of style of which Monsieur de Vaugelas speaks.'

The *Maxims* of La Rochefoucauld as they appeared in their earliest form represent the genius of their author plus the influence of Madame de Sablé. In their later and less cynical form is to be perceived a measure of the humanizing and generous influence of Madame de La Fayette. One may not speak lightly of the tastes, manners, or occupations of any one

of these 'ruelles of the second order.' There must have been much that was admirable in the life there, since it compelled the admiration of Huet, La Fontaine, La Rochefoucauld, and Madame de Sévigné.

The most spectacular of these lesser coteries was that of Madeleine de Scudéry. Brunetière is sneering in his tone when he speaks of this lady: 'Cette pauvre Sapho,' he says. She had many admirable qualities, though it seems extravagant to call her, as M. Barthélemy does, 'the most remarkable figure of the seventeenth century.' She composed romances of a length unknown to the feeble readers of our day. Every story was in ten volumes when it was not in more; and every volume was a quarto. At

first glance one would incline to say that a single romance by Madeleine de Scudéry contained almost as much 'reading matter' as all the Waverley novels taken together. She was the most pitiless writer of fiction that the world has ever known. Even M. Barthélemy admits that her romances seem long and monotonous to us.

It is beyond belief that her books were ever read — at least that they were ever read through. The fascination they exercised was in part due to the fact that under classical names were to be recognized notable contemporaries. People read the *Grand Cyrus* in order to see themselves as Madeleine de Scudéry saw them. The manners, events, ideas were of their own day, and not of some vague

past as they pretended to be. The characters have been identified. Victor Cousin devoted two volumes comprising nearly a thousand pages to an interpretation of French society in the seventeenth century according to the *Grand Cyrus*. Mandane is the Duchesse de Longueville; Cyrus is the great Condé; Cléomire is the Marquise de Rambouillet; Angélique Paulet is Élise; and so on.

The romance of *Clélie* has for frontispiece a remarkable map designed by Mademoiselle de Scudéry to illustrate the progress of the 'great passion.' It is a map of the Kingdom of Tenderness. Here are pleasant valleys, hills and plains, villages and cities. There is a well-defined road which lovers may travel. They

wander along the shore of the Lake of Indifference and presently come to the town of Respect. Then they pass through a number of villages such as Love-letter, Letter-gallant, Pretty-verses, Complaisance, Submission, Little Attentions, Assiduity, Eagerness, Sensibility. In this way one fell in love according to Mademoiselle de Scudéry. On her map there was also a perfidious river called Inclination, perfidious because it led to the Ocean Dangerous. All this sentimental rubbish was highly esteemed in the year 1656, not alone by the précieuses, but by people of taste and judgment as well; and a grave and learned body of men, the French Academy, bestowed on 'La Scudéri' the Balzac prize of Eloquence.

In Alfred de Vigny's historical romance of *Cinq-Mars* is a scene at the house of Marion de Lorme where are gathered together among numerous gallants and fine gentlemen certain men of letters, Corneille, young Molière, Georges de Scudéry, the brother of Madeleine, also Descartes, two or three members of the Academy, and, of all men, John Milton! Georges de Scudéry has a map of the Kingdom of Tenderness which he explains to an admiring group. Young Poquelin professes not to find the wit of the 'carte de Tendre' very interesting, is snubbed into silence, and consoles himself by meditating the *Précieuses ridicules*. Later in the evening Milton recites from *Paradise Lost* to the satisfaction of a few of his auditors

and to the dismay of the majority. The scene is not entirely convincing. There are too many distinguished men on the stage at the same time. The effect is exaggerated and theatrical. Undoubtedly the episode is best judged from a point of view quite other than that which an Englishman or an American would naturally take. Alfred de Vigny's motive is none the less suggestive; he wishes to contrast the product of the salons and coteries with that greater literature which is independent of fashion and unaffected by the caprices of society.

When a woman is plain she may be praised for some virtue which is superior to good looks. The critic who described Madeleine de Scudéry as a 'homely old maid' was generous

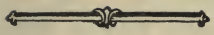
enough to add that she was 'good.' She was a very amiable woman and had been cordially received at Hôtel de Rambouillet. That she got many of her ideas there is indisputable; it is not so easy to believe, as some writers would have us believe, that she represented the pure tradition of the 'blue room' of Arthenice.

She began to hold her famous 'Saturdays' some time between 1645 and 1650. Her house became the 'normal school' of précieuses of the thorough-going sort. Wherein it differed from that more splendid school of manners at Hôtel de Rambouillet is clearly explained by Cousin. At the older house the circle was largely aristocratic, distinguished by fine blood as well as by fine breeding. If the

conversation was of literature, that did not preclude other themes. 'They talked of everything, of war, of religion, of politics.' The influence which emanated from this society was far-reaching because the matters there discussed were of varied interest, not confined to belles-lettres. On the other hand the 'Saturdays' were out and out literary, and therefore apt to be afflicted with that malaise which is always apparent if a number of people with 'literary leanings' get together. The salon of Mademoiselle de Scudéry had its better and its worse state, to be sure, but the general tendency was in the direction of preciosity pure and simple. Moreover the society was mixed. A few members of the élite came from time to time,

but the 'Saturdays' as a whole lacked distinction.

Cousin makes this comparison. At Hôtel de Rambouillet men and women sought to express noble things in a simple manner; at the 'Saturdays' they seemed to be trying to utter unimportant things in a manner both strained and pretentious.



V

THE small salons increased in number. The frequenters thereof multiplied. The new word 'précieuse' began to be used in a restricted sense. The word was not so used until about thirteen years after the great period of Hôtel de Rambouillet.

How marked the contrast was between the older house and the new salons becomes clear when we note the themes of conversation among the précieuses. For example, they dis-

cussed the great question whether history should be preferred to romance, or romance to history. Being new women, they were agitated over the question how much liberty it was woman's right to enjoy. Some took the ground that if husbands were suspicious, then it was the privilege of wives to give them a reason for suspicion. One may guess accurately how such a topic would have been received at Hôtel de Rambouillet! They mingled all kinds of diverse interests in a manner truly grotesque. They prepared a manual of conversation. They dressed dolls with a view to studying the effect of the new fashions which they proposed to introduce. They conversed in a manner so alambiquée that it ended like the

meeting of a Browning society — no one of them could understand the others. They made impromptus and madrigals. In short, they did all sorts of things, no one of which would they have dared to do at Hôtel de Rambouillet. Yet in many instances they seemed to have learned their lesson of the older house. But the dignity, the ceremonial repression which the Marquise herself exercised together with her own personal sweetness and good sense — all these elements were lacking.

They annexed, though they can hardly be said to have conquered, the entire kingdom of knowledge. Some were philosophical. A précieuse who had lost a friend by death gave a disquisition on grief. She maintained the

interesting thesis that the chief purpose of grief is to help one to live over again all the pleasure one has enjoyed with the lost friend. Others took the homely position that the object of grief is to make one miserable. Mademoiselle Dupré, an acquaintance of Mademoiselle de Scudéry, became passionately addicted to the philosophy of Descartes. She interpreted it to her friends, though it is quite possible that her interpretation of Cartesianism belongs in the same category with Mrs. Montague's 'defense' of Shakespeare. Her ambitions were duly recognized, however, and in her particular circle she was called 'La Cartesienne.'

Some of the précieuses were enthusiastic over physical science. They

could readily be induced to leave it and talk literature. For example, Was Corneille to be preferred to Benserade? And might not Chapelain be preferred to either?

They were perhaps most active over questions of grammar and rhetoric. They invented many new phrases and expressions to the eternal laughter of outsiders, and to their own supreme content. Not a few of these phrases survive to this day and are accounted good French. On the other hand, with this passion for neologisms, they seem really to have striven for that happy medium between the slipshod and the pompous and extravagant type of speech. At least 'they made a solemn vow that in conversation they would aim in purity of style at the

rooting out of words in questionable taste, and they proclaimed unending war against pedants and provincials.'

They brought about a radical change in spelling. They decided to abolish the superfluous letters from such words as teste, hostel, tousjours, goust, and the like. Such changes as they made still hold good. To this day people spell these words tête, hôtel, toujours, goût. Rœderer quotes from Somaize a list of one hundred and thirty-four words, nearly all of which owe their present spelling to the influence of the précieuses. This is an interesting fact, for we have it on the authority of Tallemant that some of the précieuses never learned to spell at all.

The truth is, preciosity includes so

many contradictory elements that it is difficult to characterize it. One would suppose from the attitude of hostile critics that it was a deadly sin to be a précieuse. Whether it was or not seems really to have depended upon the kind of précieuse one was. There were many varieties, some neither admirable nor the reverse, some quite ridiculous. To this last class belonged such women as Madelon and Cathos in the play. In fact, to call a woman a précieuse was to be indefinite. There must be a qualifying adjective. The lady might be a précieuse illustre, or a précieuse grande, or simply a précieuse ridicule; and it was a long way from first to last. The chief defect of preciosity as it showed itself in ruelles of the second and third

order was its glorifications of trifles. These people loved to play at literary games, but they had no great care for literature. They delighted in mere bagatelles, such as enigmas and sonnets to a lady's eyebrow. We are appalled at the sight of Dean Swift spending his final melancholy days in writing conundrums; it was the last infirmity of a mind which if not noble had at least noble qualities. But what shall we say when a whole society of intelligent men and women give themselves up to such frivolities? And one is astonished to see with how grave a face they carried on their elaborate fooling. There must have been a few who would gladly have broken away from bagatelles, whether literary or conversational, in order to

introduce more wholesome influence. The courage was lacking. The punishment for taking one's ease in these charming courts was that one conformed to what appeared to be the chief source of their charm. A man might know that he was stifling the higher and more rugged qualities of literature, but he conformed just the same.

This bright, artificial world had its historiographer. His name was Somaize. He holds a place in the annals of literature not because he was a writer, but because he made a Dictionary of the Précieuses, containing pen-portraits, comments on their philosophy, and a collection of their phrases and circumlocutions. There were two editions of the dictionary, —

one little and one big. The 'grand' dictionary gives the names of seven hundred recognized précieuses, never the real name, to be sure, but a classical counterpart which was understood by the elect.

Somaize defends the précieuses, or at least seems to do so. He combats the popular error that a précieuse is a woman at least forty-five years old, plain, and opposed to matrimony. It is a mistake also to suppose that the possession of wit alone entitles women to be called précieuses. Only they may be so designated who busy themselves in writing or in correcting the writing of others, who lay stress upon the reading of romances, and above all, who invent ways of speaking which are bizarre in their novelty

and unusual in their significance. Somaize says that it was one of the doctrines of the précieuses that a thought was of no value when it could be understood by all the world; they held themselves under obligation to speak otherwise than do common people, so that their ideas might be grasped only by those who have mental powers above the vulgar. Thus he accounts for their efforts to destroy the old language and substitute for it one that is not only new, but peculiar to themselves.

If you were a genuine précieuse you had two names, one the name which your parents gave you, the other a poetical name, — nom de Parnasse. This seems foolish, but is not so foolish as it seems. I do not speak

by the card, but I take it the custom partly originated in the need to have a more euphonious word for poetry than is offered in the average proper name. And we all know that privileges are accorded poets which are denied to commercial travelers. Landor addressed a poem to 'Ianthe.' This was not the young lady's name; she was a Miss Jones. But one cannot use that sort of name in poetry any more than he can E. Mandeville Stubbs or M. Pett Mudge. To be sure Wordsworth did it, but he failed to establish the practice as a universal poetic custom. It is a mere question of euphony. Wilkinson sounds harsh in poetry, yet the ear hears with delight such phrases as 'Sidney's sister Pembroke's mother.' Those words

were not without grace long before they acquired the meaning which we attach to them.

Moreover this renaming of people is an innocent sophistication which has the sanction of antiquity. It prevails in all literature of a certain age. Men were never themselves, but always somebody else, and the most fashionable of gentlemen and ladies loved to think that they were shepherds and shepherdesses. Shakespeare does not speak of Marlowe as the 'late Christopher Marlowe,' or as the 'distinguished playwright and poet who has so recently died,' but calls him 'shepherd.' Malherbe rechristened the Marquise de Rambouillet *Arthénice*, an anagram on Catherine. This fact has disturbed

some critics like the readable Paul Albert, for example, who calls Hôtel de Rambouillet a 'hot-house' in which were nursed exotic plants brought from Italy and Spain, plants of no particular use except to show Frenchmen what queer literary flora was produced in foreign lands.

Preciosity is after all only a matter of degree. It is well to be refined; the sin of the précieuses consisted in refining upon refinement until spontaneity and naturalness were entirely lost. Take that question of the choice of words. At Hôtel de Rambouillet it seemed best to avoid certain words and to substitute circumlocutions. There is no harm in this. Let language be made as pliant as possible. But let this flexibility be

obtained by legitimate means, and let good sense reign in the deliberations of the self-appointed judges. If it be a sin to use a circumlocution instead of a plain term, then are all men sinners. We should be lenient towards those who use words to conceal thoughts: still more towards those who use words to express with restraint a thought which otherwise might come with dismaying bluntness. For example, there are certain vigorous old English words which we rarely utter. It is not because they are coarse or indecent, but because they are definite and positive. Such words are entirely reputable and more than expressive. No feeling of prejudice attaches to them when they occur in the Scripture les-

son, or are met with in literature of a robust type like the plays of Shakespeare or the novels of Fielding. For conversational purposes they may be said to have disappeared.

The reason may be in part this. The public classifies words for itself, with little heed to the classification of grammarians and philologists. The public takes many words and puts them in either of two categories, out-of-door words and drawing-room words. Moreover it is not always thought a virtue to bring out-of-door expressions into the drawing-room. It may be daring and 'original,' but as a matter of taste it is as if an oarsman, to show his originality and independence, were to go out to dine in the costume in which he had been

rowing in his shell. People admit that there are ranks or orders of words, admit it by their practice even when they do not theorize about it. The proof lies in the fact that they invariably suppress certain words and use an equivalent.

Such suppression is not in itself madness, but that way the madness of preciosity lies. If we habitually use a synonym which is rather worse than the word supplanted, if we strain at gnats and swallow camels, we demonstrate anew that the spirit of preciosity is still potent. Indeed the précieuses are not dead; *male* and female they still exist. The modern spirit manifests itself in a hundred ways. Sometimes it runs to decadent prose and verse in the effort to

be striking. Sometimes it prompts to the printing of books on paper which might have been made to wrap steaks in, and the illustration of one's poetic ideas by means of decorations rather less intelligible than an ordinary nightmare. Sometimes it finds its highest joy in being published in an edition so 'limited' that after the personal friends have been supplied the volume is at once catalogued as 'scarce and out of print.' There is nothing reprehensible in being out of print; most books are rather better so. But when the first edition of *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, published at Kilmarnock, became scarce and out of print, it was for reasons unknown to amateurs of preciosity.

In these and similar matters we are

taught to believe that good sense and good taste prevailed at Hôtel de Rambouillet. The testimony of Chapelain, already quoted, is conclusive. Other and quite as good testimony is not wanting. In the outer circles of preciosity, however, it was quite otherwise. A thoroughgoing précieuse, to whom words were rather more important than ideas, would not speak of her ears; she would say *the gates of my understanding;* she would speak of night as the *mother of silence*, war as the *mother of discord;* a hat was not a hat, it was the *defier of the weather* (l'affronteur des temps); chairs were the *indispensables of conversation;* and tears were the *pearls of Iris:* no one shed tears, he shed pearls. Teeth were *the furniture of the mouth;* a ser-

geant of police was *the bad angel of criminals;* a mirror was known as *a painter of supreme fidelity;* and soup masqueraded under the phrase, *the harmony of two elements.*

These and similar expressions to the number of several hundred were collected by Somaize from the lips of people who used them, or from the letters and romances of the time, and are to be found in his *Grand Dictionnaire des Prétieuses.* A scientific classification of them is given in the fourth volume of the *Histoire de la Langue et de la Littérature française,* now publishing under the editorial direction of that distinguished scholar, M. Petit de Julleville. The malady was widespread. Molière himself was not wholly able to escape it. Nei-

ther was Corneille. In much the same way Shakespeare dropped into occasional Euphuistic forms even when he was not laughing at Euphuism.

When preciosity reached the country towns it became more ridiculous than ever, and fell quite naturally under the lash of the satirist. Molière is believed to have tried the effect of the *Précieuses ridicules* in the provinces before he produced it in Paris. There were so many précieuses in Lyons that Somaize devoted twenty-eight pages to them in an appendix to the *Dictionnaire.* They were to be found at Bordeaux, at Aix, at Poitiers, at Arles, and at Montpellier. In the *Voyage de Chapelle et de Bachaumont* is an account

of a visit to a gathering of country précieuses, the very type which Molière must often have encountered during his years of provincial travel. Chapelle describes their affected and pretentious airs. He satirizes their tawdry rhetoric, and turns them into ridicule by making them talk of the 'divine beauty' of Mademoiselle de Scudéry, and speak of Pellisson as an Adonis. When one of these ladies referred to D'Assoucy as a member of the French Academy, Chapelle declares that he and his companions were seized with so irresistible a desire to laugh that they were obliged to leave the room and leave the house; they went back to their inn to have their laugh out at leisure.

There was abundant material for

satire in the externals of preciosity, as may be learned by reading Livet's account of a 'morning' at the house of some representative blue-stocking. These people *lived* comic opera and did n't know it. One would like to have seen such a gathering, the high-priestess throned upon her couch, the spaces on either side of the bed (the ruelles) filled with ladies and gallants, the fluttering of fans and feathers, the rustle and gleam of satin and silk, the little beribboned canes which they waved incessantly while they talked; the talk itself, infinitely clever in some cases and infinitely absurd in others; the flourishes and bows, the compliments and witticisms; and then the general serenity which filled every breast, the con-

sciousness that no vulgar sound could mar the turn of a verse or the climax of an apostrophe, for the door-knocker was carefully muffled.

VI

THE Marquise de Rambouillet died in 1665. For some time before her death the salon had been but a shadow of its former self. The memory of the great days survived, but the great days were no longer possible. New ideas had begun to mould the literature of the seventeenth century. Preciosity was not annihilated by Molière's attack, but more than ever it became a reproach and a byword. The latter-day pré-

cieuses had the name but not the power. They might summon spirits from the vasty deep, but the only response was the irreverent laughter of spectators.

That preciosity had many virtues cannot be denied. It was exceeding picturesque also; and picturesqueness alone is a virtue for which we ought to be grateful. The pages which contain its history are among the most fascinating in the annals of French literature. The Marquise was in many ways a great woman. She was admirable in her own day, she is admirable in ours. It was no small accomplishment to have had a refining influence upon one's day and generation. It was no little or unworthy thing to have retained

one's social supremacy through so many years, and by entirely legitimate methods. Historians have exaggerated the intellectual frivolity of Hôtel de Rambouillet. After all it seems less culpable to be frivolous over words and ideas than over cards; and if it is a question of ultimate idiocy, charades are no worse than dancing. Let us not exaggerate the significance of trifles. Incredible as it may appear, I have seen human beings playing hjalma; the men were college-graduates and the women belonged to clubs. If, then, we are inclined to laugh at a society which could divide into two hostile camps on the question which of two sonnets was the better, we may take comfort in the compensating thought that

these people actually knew a sonnet when they saw one.

The statement may be hard to prove, but without doubt the circle of Hôtel de Rambouillet better deserves our respect than the best society of any favorite centre at the present day. It was the misfortune of Hôtel de Rambouillet to have outlived its usefulness. But that may happen to any man, any woman, any organization. It was also its misfortune to have been imitated, and badly imitated. Yet the genuine is none the less genuine because the spurious exists. 'Hôtel de Rambouillet has its place, and that a great place in the history of the seventeenth century. It was the incomparable vestibule of modern culture. The men of that

generation had no reason to regret that they had frequented the "blue room" of Arthénice. Some no doubt learned affectation, but more learned to think delicately, and all to speak well.'

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

THIS sketch of Hôtel de Rambouillet will serve no real purpose unless it stimulates the reader to consult a few, at least, of the many books and essays in which French critical scholarship and genius have interpreted the history of seventeenth century literature. Larroumet well says that one might make a small library out of the books devoted to the société précieuse. The following bibliography is for the use of 'gentle' readers; it is not addressed to

literary specialists or professional bibliographers.

Having in mind, therefore, the amateur of good books rather than the pundit, I have grouped the materials relating to Hôtel de Rambouillet and the Précieuses thus: —

First: The more or less condensed notices to be found in manuals of French literature. These works are inexpensive and accessible. They present the subject in epitome.

1. **Lanson** (Gustave), *Histoire de la Littérature française.* Paris, Hachette, 1898, pp. 368–391.

2. **Lintilhac** (Eugène), *Littérature française.* Paris, André fils, 1895. Deuxième partie, pp. 9–16.

3. **Brunetière** (Ferdinand), *Manuel de l'histoire de la Littérature française.* Paris, Delagrave, 1898, pp. 106–130.

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4. **Geruzez** (Eugène), *Histoire de la Littérature française.* Paris, Didier, 1869, pp. 35–63.

5. **Albert** (Paul), *Littérature française des origines à la fin du XVI^e Siècle.* Paris, Hachette, 1881, pp. 387–404.

6. **Pergameni** (Hermann), *Histoire générale de la Littérature française.* Paris, Alcan, 1889, pp. 209–213.

SECOND: Extended accounts and monographs.

1. **Petit de Julleville** (L.), *Histoire de la Langue et de la Littérature française.* Paris, Colin, 1897. Vol. IV., chapters 1, 2, and 7.

This magnificent work is being written by collaboration. The chapters in question are by Petit de Julleville, Bourciez,

and Morillot. Excellent bibliographies at the end of each chapter.

2. **Demogeot** (Jacques), *Tableau de la Littérature française au XVII^e Siècle avant Corneille et Descartes.* Paris, Hachette, 1859, pp. 205–300.

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Privately printed and expensive. Modest Parisian booksellers will sometimes part with the volume for ten dollars. There is a copy in the Boston Public Library.

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6. **Brunetière** (F.), *Études Critiques*, deuxième série : *La Société précieuse*, a review of *La Jeunesse de Fléchier* by the Abbé Fabre.

In this essay Brunetière makes his often quoted distinction between the esprit gaulois and the esprit précieux.

7. **Larroumet** (Gustave), *Notice historique sur les Précieuses ridicules*. Paris, Garnier.

This book should be in the hands of all students. The eighty pages of introduction are in the highest degree suggestive and informing.

8. **Crane** (Thomas Frederick), *La Société française au XVII^e Siècle*. New York, Putnam, 1889.

Contains a large and carefully selected group of passages relating to Hôtel de Rambouillet, nearly all from contemporary writers. There are copious notes, an intro-

duction of thirty-four pages, a bibliography, and a reproduction of the 'Carte du Tendre.'

9. **Breitinger** (H.), *Aus neuern Litteraturen*. Zurich, 1879, pp. 1–54. *Der Salon Rambouillet und seine culturgeschichtliche Bedeutung*.

10. **Colombey** (Émile), *Ruelles*, *Salons*, *et Cabarets*. Paris, Dentu, 1892.

This list does not begin to exhaust the number of critical and historical studies. The reader who consults these will have no difficulty in getting track of what he wants. The numerous passages scattered through the various writings of Sainte-Beuve should be read.

THIRD: Direct sources, among which are: —

1. **Tallemant de Réaux**: *Les Historiettes*, 3e édition, De Monmerqué et Paulin Paris. Paris, Techener, 1862, six vols.

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3. **Somaize** (Baudeau de), *Le Grand Dictionnaire des Prétieuses*, edited by Livet. Paris, Jannet, 1856, 2 vols., Bibliothèque elzévirienne.

4. **Balzac**: *Les Œuvres de Monsieur de Balzac*. Paris, Thomas Jolly, 1665, 2 vols., folio.

A modern edition by Moreau, Paris, 1854.

5. **Scudéry** (Madeleine de), *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*. Paris, Courbé, 1649–53.

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The Riverside Press
PRINTED BY H. O. HOUGHTON & CO.
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.
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